

THE AGENCY FOR CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING

POLICY MANUAL

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SUBJECT:

Communications

1. Introduction

The Agency's commitment to openness and accountability makes effective communication with clients, stakeholders and the general public a priority.

The Communications Policy is concerned with the way the Agency communicates with clients—both its legal client, CMHC, and the housing co-operatives whose agreements with CMHC the Agency oversees. The Policy also deals with the way the Agency informs the general public about its work.

The Communications Policy complies with the terms of the Agency's service agreement with CMHC and complements the Client-Service and the Bilingual Services, Privacy, and Confidentiality and Access to Information policies, which deal with many matters associated with communication.

2. Standards

The Agency's communications will meet the following standards:

- The Agency provides its clients, stakeholders and the public with timely, accurate, clear and appropriate information about its policies, programs, services and initiatives.

- The Agency communicates promptly, openly and courteously with clients and stakeholders.
- The Agency honours the values of transparency and accountability to its clients and the general public by practising assertive disclosure in its communications, while respecting the obligation to protect private and confidential information.
- The Agency ensures that its communications can be readily understood by making them available in English and French, as required by the Bilingual Services Policy, and by using various communication tools and formats, including plain language and alternative media, to meet different needs.
- The Agency's communications comply as necessary with the federal visibility requirements set out in the Agency's agreement with CMHC.

3. Electronic Communications

When not communicating in person, the Agency will normally communicate by e-mail and through postings on its website. Print communications will be infrequent.

3.1 The Agency makes extensive use of electronic media to

- (a) inform the public about the Agency and its operations;
- (b) bridge geographic distances between the Agency and its clients and stakeholders in different regions of Canada;
- (c) facilitate delivery of the Agency's services to clients; and
- (d) accomplish these objectives at reasonable cost.

3.2 The Agency's program of electronic communications comprises the following:

- (a) electronic transmission of correspondence;
- (b) a bilingual Agency presence on the Internet, serving clients, stakeholders and the general public;
- (c) a public website that includes Board and staff contact information, the Agency's policies and annual reports, and information on the co-operative housing programs and the Agency's operations;
- (d) password-protected areas on the Agency's website, accessible to specific groups of external users;

- (e) an intranet to serve as a portal to the Agency's electronic records and to facilitate the sharing of news and the exchange of views among Agency offices and between staff and management;
- (f) electronic messaging to allow the Agency to alert co-ops and stakeholders to new developments and new materials on the website, while keeping each separate e-mail address private from other recipients;
- (g) an occasional electronic bulletin providing news and information of interest to clients and stakeholders. The bulletin is normally distributed by e-mail to clients, stakeholders and subscribers.
- (h) a web-published annual report that describes the Agency's activities and achievements throughout the year and summarizes its annual audited financial statement.

3.3 As required, the Agency issues other publications, which are normally distributed by e-mail.

3.4 Agency staff decide which materials to place on the Agency's public website and which to reserve for the client websites. In making these decisions, staff will weigh the Agency's commitment to public accountability against its wish to provide stakeholders and clients with special value through an enriched client website.

4. Communications with Co-operative Housing Clients and other Stakeholders

4.1 The Agency is committed to the prompt communication of all important information to its client housing co-operatives and other stakeholders as regional federations of housing co-operatives, property-management companies, the Federal Co-operative Housing Stabilization Fund and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada.

4.2 The Agency will maintain a toll-free telephone line to ensure that co-operatives will be able to speak with the appropriate regional office of the Agency at no expense.

4.3 In a timely manner, the Agency will post on its client website each co-operative's Annual Information Returns, Risk Assessment Reports, Compliance Reports, Co-operative Data Reports and Property Condition Reports.

4.4 The Agency will use its client websites to supply clients and stakeholders with relevant news and resources drawn from internal and external sources.

- 4.5 The Agency will present its co-op clients and stakeholders with annual information on the performance of its service to clients. It may do this in conjunction with the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada's annual conference.
- 4.6 To assist in ensuring that its relations with housing co-operatives and other stakeholders develop in a way that meets the needs of all parties, the Agency has adopted procedures to govern Agency communications with co-op clients and other groups.

5. Communications with the Public

- 5.1 The website serves as the Agency's primary communications tool with the general public.
- 5.2 Guided by its Privacy and Confidentiality and Access to Information policies, the Agency responds promptly and courteously to enquiries from residents of housing co-operatives, people seeking residency and the general public. Requests for information of other than a factual nature are referred to CMHC for response, as the Agency's service agreement with CMHC requires.

6. Federal Visibility

- 6.1 The service agreement between CMHC and the Agency has certain provisions intended to ensure that the federal government remains visible to the public and program clients, whatever the changes in roles and responsibilities for its co-operative housing programs. These provisions do not affect Agency correspondence about its administrative services. However, publicity materials or program information directed to the general public, co-operatives or members of co-operatives must contain a CMHC-approved reference to the role and support for the programs provided by the federal government through CMHC.
- 6.2 The CMHC name, logo and other symbols may not be used without CMHC's written consent. When permission is given, their use must comply with CMHC's branding guidelines.
- 6.3 The Agency and its representatives are free to publish speeches, post signs and distribute notices of public events, announcements and news releases, written and electronic, about factual, programmatic matters. However, CMHC must first approve public communications in any form about any other matter coming under the service agreement or relating to CMHC. The agreement with CMHC requires the Agency to submit communications requiring its approval 15 days in advance.

7. Communications and the Board

- 7.1 The Agency will post approved minutes of meetings of the Board and its committees on the Agency intranet and CMHC's password-protected area on the Agency's website.
- 7.2 Highlights from Board meetings, other than confidential matters, will be posted on the Agency's public website.
- 7.3 When a confidential matter comes before the Board, the discussion and any decisions will be recorded in a special addendum to the minutes of the meeting. The addendum will be distributed only to directors and any others specifically named by the Board. Confidential issues coming before Board committees will be treated in a similar way. Directors and committee members are expected to exercise discretion in discussing these matters beyond the Board.
- 7.4 Directors will conduct all communications in accordance with the expectations set out in the Role of Individual Directors Policy.

8. Issues Management

- 8.1 Before launching any major new initiative, the Agency will develop a special communications plan. This plan may involve the use of any or all of the Agency's regular communications tools, as well as new ones developed for that specific purpose. The plan may involve outreach directed to different audiences over varying periods of time and will include a scheduled evaluation of whether the plan was effective.
- 8.2 Agency staff will follow the Agency's protocol with CMHC on communications when responding, or preparing to respond, to the news media or any elected official seeking information that concerns CMHC or services under the Agency's agreement with CMHC.
- 8.3 In matters that do not concern CMHC, the CEO or a designate acts as the Agency's public spokesperson. When the Board's voice needs to be heard, the president of the Agency or a designate speaks on the Board's behalf.

9. Communications and the Agency's Workforce

The Agency's workforce consists of management, temporary and permanent employees, out-partners who, on contract, perform technical work for the Agency, and, occasionally, casual labour. Full and open communication among staff and between staff and

management will increase the commitment and organizational loyalty of staff and demonstrate that the Agency is true to its professed values.

- 9.1 The Agency's management and employees will have full access to information about co-op clients and the Agency's own operations, policies and resources.
- 9.2 The Agency will make available information about co-op clients and the Agency to out-partners and casual labour only on a need-to-know basis.
- 9.3 Subject to the Agency's policies governing privacy and confidentiality, Agency staff may communicate freely with clients, stakeholders and the general public on all factual, programmatic matters. Without specific permission, staff must not attempt to answer any questions from news media or elected officials at any level of government about CMHC or about services under the agreement with CMHC. Any such questions shall be referred to the relevant staff member listed in the protocol on Agency-CMHC communications.
- 9.4 Members of the Agency's workforce are expected to keep their supervisor at the Agency informed about any emerging issues that could attract media attention. Supervisory staff shall alert the Agency contact named in the previously mentioned protocol to any such emerging issue.

10. Communication of Financial Information about the Agency

- 10.1 CMHC will receive a copy of the Agency's full audited financial statements and auditor's report each year.
- 10.2 Staff will refer to the Chief Executive Officer any requests for financial information not contained in the annual report. The CEO may exercise discretion in determining what information to share, while being mindful of the Agency's preference for openness.